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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAL](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: THE STRUGGLE OF DAILY LIFE FOR IRAQI-PALESTINIAN

REFUGEES IN AL-TANF

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4(b,d)

11. (C) Summary: For the first time in over two years an Embassy officer visited the Iraqi-Palestinian refugees camp in Al-Tanf, established in the "no-man's-land" between the Syrian and Iraqi borders. Conditions remain hostile despite the UN's best efforts to provide basic food, non-food, medical, and educational support to the nearly 800 refugees living in tents located a few feet away from a heavily trafficked road. UNHCR is also working diligently to relocate these refugees and permanently shutter the camp by year's end, according to acting UNHCR representative Philip Leclerc. End Summary.

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Inhospitable Location  
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12. (C) UNHCR officers and PolOff visited the Al-Tanf Iraqi-Palestinian refugee camp on June 4. The camp, located in the no-man's-land between the Syrian and Iraqi borders (approximately 285 kilometers from Damascus) has been open since May 2006 and houses Iraqi-Palestinian refugees who can neither enter Syria nor return to Iraq. There are presently 798 souls residing in the camp, nearly half of whom are under the age of 18. A tour of the camp confirmed UNHCR's assessment regarding the inhospitable nature of the location. There is little activity in this desert location save for the hundreds of trucks parked and driving within a feet from the hundreds of tents provided by UNHCR. To date this traffic activity has claimed the lives of two young children.

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UNHCR's Relief Efforts  
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13. (SBU) UNHCR works under difficult conditions to provide the basic essentials to sustain life and help these stranded refugees maintain some measure of dignity. UNHCR, working with its partners (UNICEF, WFP, UNRWA, the Palestinian and Syrian Arab Red Crescent), daily trucks into the camp 70,000 liters of water, 320 sacks of bread, and enough diesel to fuel seven generators which provide up to 20 hours electricity, according to UNHCR staff members. A small "tent-school," supported by UNICEF, administers the UNRWA

curriculum to nearly 200 students. The teachers, who are refugees themselves, earn a small stipend funded by UNHCR and trained by UNICEF and UNRWA.

14. (SBU) The school has become the center for social activity in the camp; young people play cards, put on plays and sing songs. After dark, when the scorching heat subsides, soccer is the sport of choice among the boys. UNHCR employs roughly 72 of the camp dwellers and pays them 70 USD per month for jobs such as teaching, warehouse keeping, and cleaning. While there is little to buy on site, this meager salary helps pay for cell phone cards so that the refugees can keep in touch with family members scattered across the globe. There is a small clinic in the camp attended by doctors who rotate in and out on a weekly basis and by refugees trained as nurses. The Syrian government does allow travel to Damascus (the closest city with proper medical facilities) for those refugees in need of major medical treatment. The 18 pregnant women currently in the camp will be allowed to travel to Damascus, once they approach their ninth month of pregnancy, to deliver their babies. Unfortunately it takes time to acquire the necessary permissions to travel on medical grounds, time which a critically injured or sick person simply cannot spare, according to UNHCR.

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#### Camp Elders Discuss on Resettlement

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15. (C) PolOff met with the eight members of the locally elected camp committee, one of whom quipped they represented the most democratic community in the Middle East. The laughter did not last long, though; many of the eight did not

speak at all and appeared somewhat dazed, staring ahead with slumped shoulders. Those men who did speak had no complaints about the UN services they received; they expressed appreciation for the UN, and simply asked that the United States do what it could to move them out of the camp. Like orphans to prospective parents, these elders pleaded with outstretched hands for a reprieve, insisting they "would not be a burden" if taken in by a third country. "We are willing and eager to work," they said. Many of them indicated an interest in being resettled to the U.S. As for immediate needs, they requested firefighting equipment as a recent fire claimed the life of a pregnant woman and destroyed nearly a half-dozen tents along with the victims' possessions and identity documents.

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#### One Family's Testimony

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16. (SBU) PolOff sat in the "home" of one of the elders along with his sons Omar, age 19, and Mohammed, age 27. The tent was tidy and a small air-conditioning unit was working overtime to beat back the oppressive desert heat. The family described the harsh living conditions from the extreme heat of summer to the floods that wipe out tents in winter, as well as the constant intrusion by snakes, spiders and scorpions. The well known Arab hospitality was on full display as they graciously offered what little food and drink they had to their guest. They asked countless questions about life in the United States, particularly about music and sports. They talked about their hope for a life outside the tent city and described how they had recently been interviewed by a Norwegian delegation for resettlement. The conversation was interrupted by the matriarch of the family, who hurriedly ran into the tent and said there was a fire in the camp. We quickly gathered our shoes and anything that might hold water and ran with dozens of others to the area where the alarm was raised. Mercifully, it was a false alarm, and the family returned back to the tent, buckets in hand, heart in throat.

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#### The Problematic Future of Al-Tanf

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17. (C) According to UNHCR acting Representative Philip Leclerc, nearly half of the refugees are slated to be taken in by a third country. Belgium, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Italy have all come forward and offered to relocate some of these Iraqi-Palestinians. Leclerc admits that few of the original refugees from 2006 remain in the camp. He reported that as hundreds were relocated to third countries, the SARG quickly re-filled the camp with Palestinians the government had rounded up in Syria for carrying false papers. He noted that he had been working with the SARG to close the camp and had gained assurances that no new families would be sent to al-Tanf. If all went well, Leclerc told us, the camp could zip shut its tent doors by the end of the year. He expressed worry, however, that despite the efforts of the aforementioned European countries, there could be as many as 400 refugees left without a prospective third country to call home. Leclerc hoped that should this "worst case scenario" occur, the U.S. would intervene and take the remaining families.

18. (C) Comment: The existence of this camp remains a blight on the outstanding record of the U.S. to resettle Iraqi refugees who cannot return home. The living conditions are intolerable and the deaths attributed to these conditions add urgency to the need for Washington to quickly explore the possibility of resettling those who will not be taken in by our European friends. Recent engagement with the SARG has opened a space that previously did not exist for a sensitive discussion on this point. We recommend moving on this issue while the window of opportunity remains open, as the closure of this camp is long overdue.  
CONNELLY